

[Arthur Botsford]

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Thomaston, Conn.

Interview with Arthur Botsford. [?] "The old Tavern Barn stood up there where the Lyons block is now on Main street, then later they split it up in two parts and made houses out of it and moved it down where the school house now stands. It used to be run, they tell me, by old Aunt Hannah Williams, Gus Blakeslee's wife's mother, but hell, I can't tell you anything about it, because I wasn't interested much in taverns when that [?] was standing.

"Tom Hart ran it later. It was a kind of combination tavern and hotel and livery stable and I imagine it was a great gathering place for the town sports in its day. After it was [?] moved and made into a residence, Oscar Ebner and Vehrle and Gates the postmaster all lived in it.

"Then of course there was the old hotel—the Thomaston house—that came a little later and the first one that I remember to run it was John Mullins. That was a popular spot for many year. There weren't a great many clubs in town. There was the Criterion club—but I never belonged to that—I remember hearin' something about that famous hoax that was pulled by some of them boys with an automobile [battery?—people thought 'twas an infernal machine—but I can't tell you the [?] story in detail—you oughta get it from some of the others.... They used to have some hot times at the Criterion club.

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"I told you about old Seth Thomas' store that was in the Morse block—Well, on the morning of July 5th, 1855 1877, the fire alarm sounded—that old store burnt up and the big barn in back of it and fire gutted the whole block. They tore the building down—the fire department did—they got [?] five hundred [p?] people on the end of a rope and pulled and down she came.

"Lots of the boys was in Waterbury that night and they heard about the fire and came up to town on the [st?] steam engine. They sent a fire 2 engine over from Hartford by railroad on a special flat car to [?] help put that fire out. I guess it was the biggest fire we ever had in Thomaston.

"There was a four horse stage used to run through town—did I tell you about that—ran from Litchfield to Hartford in the [?] sixties. Before they hit town—they used to change horses here—they sounded a bugle to let 'em know they were coming. That's a custom that railroad trains later imitated—didn't know that did you?

"Railroad trains had to fuel up at every station—used to have woodsheds right along side the tracks and load 'em up at every town. They stood over there by the tracks for years.

"Years ago we used to cross an old covered bridge that spanned the Naugatuck and go down into the meadow and across the railroad tracks. My father used to tell about old man Fenn, who [?] carried the mail from the depot to [?] Seth Thomas' store, where the post office [?] was. He tried it during a flood one time and got carried several hundred yards down the river.

"There was a tight board fence in the middle of the bridge and one on either side and I remember a tale about an Irishman who used to take a drop too much once [?] in a while and always got as "light as a feather." One night when he was as 'light as a feather' he jumped what he thought was the middle fence, but it turned out to be the end one, and he landed plump in the river.

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"Down in the meadow they used to-play ball, right where the casting shop is. I can remember sitting up on the bank, when I was a kid and seeing Thomaston and Torrington playing ball there, and they got into a hell of a fight. 3 "No, 'twasn't neither baseball nor football. 'Twas a game called 'wicket.' I guess they got it from the English cricket player 'cause it was almost the same. There was a difference, but I couldn't tell you just what it was. The bat was shaped like a spoon, and the pitchers wasn't called pitchers, but 'bowlers.' They [?] had a wicket set up and they aimed for that.

"Ain't nobody knows much about it now. They had a reunion of old Wicket players around hers [?] somewhere, a good many years ago. And don't forget in those days they didn't have no masks, nor gloves, nor shin protectors and the like of that. The best catcher they ever had here was Tim Duane, who caught barehanded. He was mayor of Chelsea, afterwards.

"I don't know what good all this stuff is to you, its just snatches of this that and the other. I can't remember dates and there's lots of important things I forget. What's it got to do with clocks?

"Social life in them days was largely connected with churchgoing. There wasn't any automobiles or movies. All the young folks used to go to church. A fellow'd meet his girl there and walk home with her—nowdays they got [?] to go out in a car somewheres. What you need now is a half a pint and an old tin lizzie.

"There was more interest in lodges [?] then. [?] I've belonged to the Odd Fellows for 53 years. Lodges ain't what they used to be—too many outside interests. There was a few benefit organizations to, like the Aegis and the Workmen's—wasn't no compensation for shop injuries then. They started the Shop Aid about 1890, and it run for a while, then it busted up, and then it started again. Rut it didn't pay much. When old man Vehrle lost his hand all he got was [?] seventy-five dollars. I joined it when it started, but the next time they got it going, they set the age limit at 50 and that let me out.

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"I thought I had something up here might interest you (rummaging around [?] in a wall closet) "but I can't seem to lay hands on it. Lemme show you these. " (Handful of old photographs.) 4 "These here are my cousins down in Arkansas. How'd I happen to have cousins down there [?] ? Well,I had an uncle was a travelin' man and he just happened to like the country and settle down there. This one here, she's dead [?] now. [?] Here's some more relations—this little fellow here, he's grown up now and is professor of agriculture in the New [?] Milford schools.

"I [?] wisht I 'd kept files, darn it, so's I could lay hands on what I wanted when I wanted it." (Mr.Botsford is interrupted by the appearance on his front porch of a boy bringing the evening paper. He hastens to the door.)

"What do the headlines say? [?] I can't see them so [?] good without my specs. That goddam Hitler—hangin's too good for that feller. Why don't he let them people (the Jews) alone?

"Tell you how I feel about that Norton book. I don't [?] want anybody borrowing it, no matter how [?] good care they take [?] of it. Why don't they get it in the library,it ought to be there. It's called 'Etching in Memory of Charles Norton.'"

The last paragraph describes precisely Mr. [?] Botsford's attitude toward the request for the loan of "that Norton book." I'll try to borrow it from the local library.

F.D.